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Extended Alps? Mutual stereotypes between urban and mountain regions in Europe

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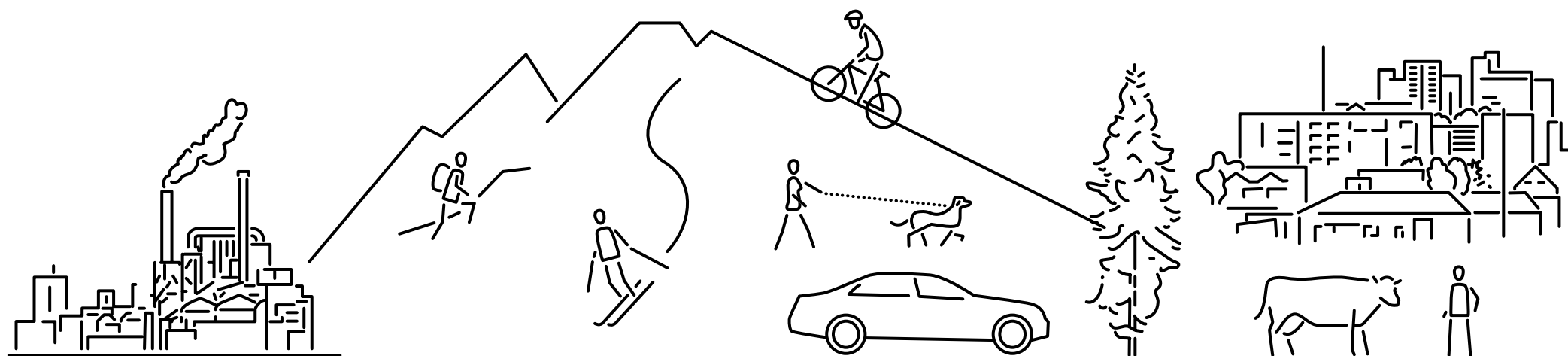
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Extended Alps?

Mutual stereotypes between urban and mountain regions in Europe



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Short Version

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Introduction

The relationship between inner- and perialpine regions is usually seen as a crucial factor for the success of the EUSALP strategy. Against this background, the present study analyses mutual perceptions between both regional contexts and identifies the related challenges for the implementation of EUSALP. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews with actors from alpine politics, a historical and socio-cultural analysis as well as existing topic-related research findings.

Unlike existing EUSALP-studies concerning the development of the Alpine region, which predominantly focus on economic, social, infra-structural and ecological questions, this study addresses the cultural dimension of “extended Alps”. The major aim is to make typical images of the Alps, held by inhabitants of the inner- and perialpine regions, not only visible but also to put them in a position where they can be critically analysed. The guiding idea is the assumption well supported by historical and cultural research, that thinking in *possibilities*, as it is necessary for the future development of the Alpine region within the framework of the EUSALP strategy, is essentially determined by established perceptions of the *real*. Therefore, traditional ideas/conceptions about what and where the Alps are, determine the horizons of what they could and should become.

On the basis of this assumption, we first identified six central topics for the creation of a fruitful “extended” understanding of the Alpine region. These working theses were presented on the EUSALP Annual Forum in 2017 and discussed in the different Action Groups. The results of the workshop contributed to the final study results and led to a series of concrete recommendations.

Theses

Thesis 1 **Extended alps – an ambiguous concept**

The appearance of mountain landscapes heavily influences images about the Alpine space. European traditions of perception and self-images of alpine habitants meet at this point. However, relationships to perialpine regions and especially to distant cities are not regarded as an integral part of ‘the Alps’, even if they are considered to have some significance with regard to socio-cultural and economic developments of Alpine regions.

Thesis 2 **Transforming imagination – a challenge**

To deal with established ideas and emotionally loaded images of the Alpine space will be a central challenge for EUSALP. ‘Extended alps’ means first of all an extension of the horizon to imagine what the alpine space is and could become.

Thesis 3 **Use the potential of commitments and networks**

The balance of power in the EUSALP perimeter does not primarily depend on the size of a region or its respective state or nation, neither on its economic strength or geographical position (inner- versus perialpine). What counts is the engagement, the interconnectedness and networking of the responsible actors.

Thesis 4 **Empowerment – a key factor**

An area-wide empowerment of regional and local actors to effectively use EUSALP-options and to implement measurements developed therein is essential to the success of EUSALP.

Thesis 5 **Rebuild the Alpine policy community**

To create new perspectives on experiential spaces and horizons of expectations concerning the Alpine space, it would be helpful to ‘productively unsettle’ well-established Alpine policy communities and the significant camps of ‘protectors’ and ‘developers’ of ‘the Alps’ found therein. This could also produce general impulses for macro-regional strategies and their governance.

Thesis 6 **Communication beyond transmission and explanation**

Communication is a central issue in the EUSALP process. Communication has to reach out far beyond the mere transmission and explanation of political decisions. The task is to establish a subsidiary system with strong participative elements to negotiate EUSALP issues within their specific spatial relations and local conditions.

Conclusion

Results and Inputs

The results of this study, which is mainly based on expert interviews and literature-based research, confirm existing interdisciplinary Alpine-research findings with regard to the perception of the Alpine space as an extraordinarily complex macro-region that is ecologically as well as socially highly sensitive. Although interview partners had different disciplinary and social backgrounds, they all agreed that only a holistic perspective adequately meets the specificity of the Alpine space. From their different perspectives, all experts pointed out that there is a far-reaching interest in the conservation and development of the alpine quality of life: A shared concern of European level. A central issue was the necessity to (re-)conciliate economical interests with the aims of a socially and ecologically sustainable development, which, at the same time, points to one of the greatest potentials of the EUSALP macro-regional strategy: Unlike most of the European macro-regions, and due to its location as well as its historical and cultural contouring, the Alpine region is deeply rooted in a collective European memory with distinctive images and ideas. The historically grown conflict between strong ecological views and a gentrified and leisure-dominated perception of the Alps is the main cause for the obstruction of the planning, discussion and political/administrative implementation of innovative approaches. A shared emotional bond to the Alpine space seems not to be entirely mobilised so far. This might be due to older spatial concepts of the Alps and difficulties to think in larger figurations on the one hand, and a still poor connectedness between European policies and civil resources on the other.

The discussion of the presented theses during the workshop at the EUSALP Annual Forum 2017 resulted in a more precise definition of the desiderates, challenges, and wishes experienced in the daily political praxis of administration and NGOs.

Even if the composition within the working groups did not entirely match those of the Action Groups, the desiderates of most of the EUSALP's core fields of action were nevertheless expressed in their inputs. A shared central issue was the basic difficulty to closely join the extended Alpine space – e.g. metropolitan areas and core areas of the alps – in a sustainable way, i.e. without new ecological and social costs. Often, spatial connectedness is still seen as identical with con-

ventional transportation routes and their negative effects on humans and environment.

Based on these findings, the participants stressed the necessity to connect concrete initiatives and to strengthen networks of actors with different regional and professional backgrounds. They also highlighted the need for a stronger visibility of EUSALP in order to effectively reach concerned citizens and to mobilise the social surpluses/additional values of the macro-regional strategies.

The following roundtable sessions confirmed the existence of widely spread emotional bonds to the Alpine space and the potential for civil engagement that lies therein. However, they also stressed the necessity for a spatially inclusive and comprehensive empowerment, especially of local actors, and an overcoming of exclusion mechanisms of technocratic systems. Therefore, one core issue concerned the relevance of an improved communication between different levels and sometimes conflicting pressure groups in order to strengthen resilient structures in the Alpine civil society.

Consequences of the EUSALP-Annual Forum results for the respective Action Groups

Action Group 1

It has been shown, that a merely metropolitan concept of innovation cannot be applied to the whole Alpine space. By contrast, different types of innovation have to be developed parallel to each other and they should not reproduce the traditionally established distinction between city (= innovation) and countryside (= tradition).

Action Groups 2 und 3

There is a desiderate to find out, which branches of trade and potential business segments figure best as central references for strategically important economic potentials in mountain areas and metropolitan regions, and in how far they are influenced by classical ideas of what is considered economically 'feasable' in Alpine areas (as especially tourism and agriculture). The persisting traditional opposition of a seemingly progress-oriented creative urban dynamic and a structure-conservative rural 'groundedness' restrained to a small set of es-

tablished trades often blocks the view on new, in part already existing, montane-metropolitan options for mutual enterprises. One example are existing strategies effected in creative industries, that aim for an innovative appropriation and use of space by new models for labour, business and life that could function as a bridge-builder between different extended Alps areas.

With regard to these findings, new educational approaches and structures should take care, that affirmations of outdated sector perspectives are not reproduced (crafting = countryside versus higher education = city). They rather should provide a framework for the development of new working-fields that stimulate montane-urban reciprocity beyond established educational structures.

Action Groups 4 and 5

An important desiderate is to figure out what kind of networks (traffic, communication, joint ventures) are the major goals and to identify parameters to prioritise promotions of different networks. As pointed out in theses 2-5, the political focus should not only highlight traffic infrastructures or agendas for digitalisation in order to provide the basis to improve the mobility of goods and people, communication or decentralised services. Rather, projects to connect the civil society within the EUSALP perimeter should be promoted.

The “extended Alps” need new platforms for exchange and mutual inspiration between urban, peri-urban and (inner-)alpine areas in order to question existing stereotypes and to work on a new, integrated image of the Alps.

Action Group 6

The concept of “resources” should be more precisely defined. The distinctions between different types of resources must be sharpened and it is important to highlight which resources matter to different stakeholders and for what reason. Here too, the power of collective images has to be taken seriously into account (the Alps as a space for/of tradition, the Alps as a leisure area, as wilderness versus the city as a “pulsating” space of consume and innovation). Established automatisms with regard to associations of images (countryside = pristine nature, living tradition etc. versus city = alienation, pollution, high- or sub-

culture...) have to be worked off and to be replaced by differentiated concepts with a certain tolerance for ambiguity.

Furthermore, it has to be considered if the specific role of “culture” needs more attention with regard to its importance for the creation of an EUSALP-identity. Culture should be regarded as more than a mere resource. The effort put on a new conception of culture with regard to the Alpine space would be of central importance for the mobilisation and integration of the concerned population: The alpine space is a productive, resonating cavity for future measurements within the EUSALP context, e.g. by a participative development of new symbolic references. It might be reasonable to create an independent Action Group with the topic “population and culture”, wherein the whole context of the strategic developments of EUSALP could be reflected and (re-)conciliated.

Action Groups 7, 8 and 9

A reconstruction of the dialogue between “protectors” and “developers” of the Alps appears to be the central challenge for these Action Groups. Stagnating camps have to be re-opened and the ecological context has to be negotiated far beyond the geomorphological Alpine space. Only then, the aims of Action Group 7 – to develop ecological connectivity in the whole EUSALP territory – could possibly be reached much faster. New visual models and narratives creating feelings of relatedness between inner- and perialpine spaces would be helpful in this process. The frame of the works within these Action Groups would be different, then. Similarly, new platforms for exchanges with the potential to create joint matches of technical, legal and behaviour-oriented approaches concerning topics like energy efficiency, or renewable energies from both perspectives and inherent experiences – the mountainous and the metropolitan.

Common challenges and recommendations

The results of our study and the discussions at the EUSALP Annual Forum provide the following challenges for macro-regional strategies as well as subsequent recommendations for common as well as Action Group-specific measurements:

- 1 Discussion and reflection of established images of the Alps and their probably restraining influence on development and innovation within the “extended Alps”.

Creating a new platform as a resonating cavity for the discussion and reflection of

- cultural and social bases of established concepts of the Alps,
- potentials for value creation and new living models within extended Alps,
- the creation of participative approaches to develop new images and models for the Alpine space (e.g. in the context of an Action Group 10 – Population and Culture).

- 2 Strengthening of especially local actors in the complex governance-mix of the macro-regional strategies by a general empowerment, simple structures and systematic support in administrative processes.

Supporting Action Group-overlapping coordination of

- goals, priorities, and processes of funding measures tailored to the addressees;
- the development, installation, and supervision of local, regional and interregional support programmes.

- 3 Remove actor-specific and regional barriers to access to ruling structures and instruments of the Alpine macro-regional strategy.

Dialogue- and research-based identification of motivating factors as well as excluding mechanisms concerning the engagement of local and regional actors within the EUSALP space,

- development of measurements and incentive structures to enhance inclusion.

- 4 Active trans-regional communication and cooperation via dialogues and participative formats in order to better mobilise the manifold socio-cultural potentials of the extended Alpine space with the inclusion of the civil society in the EUSALP regions.

Expansion of existing communicative and cooperative structures through new formats of creative exchange beyond existing operative and politico-administrative field, e.g. by supporting existing and new partnerships between montane and urban municipalities and regions within the extended Alpine space,

- expansion of interregional youth exchange programmes,
- funding of trans-regional cultural events and others.